DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 135 CS 214 349

AUTHOR Steele, Jack
TITLE The Student as Interpreter: What Do We Mean When We Ask Who Did It?
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Freshmen; Controversial Issues (Course Content); Course Content; Critical Thinking; Higher Education; *Rhetoric; *Seminars; Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS Assassinations; *Freshman Seminars; Kennedy (John F); *Rhetorical Strategies

ABSTRACT

One version of a first year seminar in rhetoric examines the President Kennedy assassination controversy as seen by several writers in a rhetorical framework that stresses the difference, particularly in regard to the writers' approaches to truth, in intellectual and imaginative discourses. The assignments, three major writing projects, introduce students to the concept of competing interpretations and then encourage them to become participants in that dialogue. In the first assignment, students examine the approaches to truth discussed in essays by E. H. Carr and Joan Didion. In the second assignment, they interpret a literary account of an historical event (Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar") from a political perspective, and in the third assignment, they examine official, unofficial, and fictional accounts of the Kennedy assassination as part of the process of creating their own version of the event. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 370 135

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Steele
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

The Student as Interpreter:

What Do We Mean When We Ask Who Did It?

by

Jack Steele

According to the official description of "First Year Seminars in Rhetoric: Contemporary Issues," a fundamental goal of the course is to "educate our students for participating in public intellectual life" by focusing on "competing interpretive frameworks" that "illuminate contemporary issues." As I see it, then, each seminar should focus on a contemporary issue in a rhetorical context: that is, from the standpoint of how texts influence the way we think. In my version of the seminars, "On the Trail of the Assassins: What do we mean when we ask who did it?" I try to achieve that goal by examining the Kennedy assassination controversy in a rhetorical framework that stresses the difference, particularly in regard to their approaches to truth, in intellectual and imaginative discourses.

The assignments, three major writing projects, introduce students to the concept of competing interpretations and then encourage them to become participants in that dialogue. In the first assignment,

CS214349

students examine the approaches to truth discussed in essays by E.H. Carr and Joan Didion. In the second assignment, they interpret a literary account of an historical event (Shakespeare's JULIUS CAESAR) from a political perspective, and in the third assignment, they examine official, unofficial, and fictional accounts of the Kennedy assassination as part of the process of creating their own version of the event.

Since it is safe to assume that students will enter the course with little if any awareness of different approaches to truth, I devote the first three weeks to a comparison of intellectual and imaginative ways of thinking and how their differences relate to conventional distinctions between nonfiction and fiction. The students read two essays that focus on inquiring into the past, E.H. Carr's "The Historian and His Facts" and Joan Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook." Carr presents a conventional view of historical and academic inquiry and directly addresses two contradictory assumptions common among students: that there is a knowable objective reality and that all opinions are totally subjective. Carr argues against the notion of a knowable objective reality but vigorously defends the idea that some interpretations are better than others, principally on the basis that objective means a balanced or fair assessment of the facts rather than accurate or absolutely true. In Carr's view, then, the purpose of intellectual inquiry is not to find an absolute truth or express a subjective one, but to develop a balanced interpretation. With this in mind, students bring to the study of past events the idea that while it may not be possible to know what happened in an

absolute sense, it is possible, through the study of different points of view, to form an opinion, or interpretation, about the significance of the event that is more than subjective.

In contrast to Carr's cautious approach to truth as empirically grounded interpretation, Joan Didion, in "On Keeping a Notebook," tells her readers that not only is the accuracy of details irrelevant for her purposes, but that "what some would call 'lies" actually improves her understanding of her past. In general, students have difficulty accepting Didion's cavalier attitude towards accuracy, even in view of her disclaimer that she is speaking of a personal notebook rather than writing for "public consumption." "Isn't the truth, the truth?"they ask, which is exactly the question I want them to ask. If we substitute Didion's notebook with fiction, her insistence that "lies" help reveal the truth represents a conventional assumption about imaginative thinking that students have no difficulty accepting and at the same time suggests a different, nonintellectual kind of truth.

I should mention here the obvious point that if we take what Didion says literally and apply it to nonfiction in general, we must confront the proposition that all writing is propaganda and that rules are made simply to facilitate the message of the rulemakers, not to insure fair play. At this point in the course, I am careful not to mention that view because it is difficult enough for

students to distinguish between different approaches to truth without confusing the issue further by telling them that the distinction is controversial. Near the end of the semester, however, I make the possible artificiality of the distinction an important issue.

I do, however, discuss what the two approaches share: a focus on the past and a reliance on something beyond facts. As we move into the assassination part of the course, then, students are aware that facts about the past do not speak for themselves and that they must be intellectually arranged and even imaginatively rearranged to create interpretations that yield meaning.

Originally, I thought of the Julius Caesar part of the course as a relatively simple preliminary to the main event. Students would compare Plutarch's Lives' of Julius Caesar and Brutus to Shakespeare's play. In practice, however, the two versions of the event contained too little that was relevant to the difference between intellectual and imaginative thinking. In addition, I began to realize that the idea of a political agenda in any type of writing was a novel idea to most students, but one with which they needed to become familiar if I expected them to write significantly about the JFK assassination. We approach the play, then, with a simple political question: is Shakespeare advocating a monarchy or a democracy? The political question is the focus, but it must be answered with explicit reference to a rhetorical concern: what methods did Shakespeare use to influence his audience? In preparing students to answer those questions in a paper, I discuss with them the characteristics of a monarchy and a democracy and how a

writer might influence an audience through his rendering of character. Since students often have difficulty understanding how anyone, even if he lived 400 years ago, could be against a democracy, I slant the discussion in favor of monarchy, or at least towards the advantages of having a strong ruler. In regard to the rhetorical issue, we discuss how writers make characters sympathetic to audiences. For example, how should they react to the death of Caesar? Is he a strong "constant" man or a cruel tyrant? Specifically, then, students support the claim that the play advocates one system or the other with evidence that Shakespeare intended the political views of one or more of the characters to be sympathetically received.

After seven weeks of reading and writing about different approaches to the truth and the political context of such approaches, students are ready to look for more than facts and villains in the literature of the JFK assassination. They are prepared to regard the search for a solution as a means of interpretation rather than an end in itself. Their assignment is a ten page research paper in which they argue for their own interpretation of the event.

Students buy the Warren Commission Report, a conspiracy text, eg., Henry Hurt's REASONABLE DOUBT, and Don DeLillo's novel, LIBRA. They have access to the 26 volumes of Hearings on which the WCR is based and the 1978

REPORT OF THE US HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASSASSINATIONS and its supporting volumes. I also schedule a screening of Oliver Stone's film JFK. Given the texts and the continuing controversy in regard to the event, it is tempting to joke about how the theme of fiction and non-fiction continues in this part of the course and ask "Where is the nonfiction?" In fact, during the writing of the paper we focus exclusively on the difference between the nonfiction texts--the WCR and the conspiracy text--as if one were, in a sense, "fiction."

In order to become acquainted with the official version of the case and most of the undisputed facts, for the first two weeks we focus exclusively on the WCR, after which, for two more weeks, we discuss a conspiracy text to discover which facts are disputed and to discuss what the dispute implies in regard to interpretation. I do not require students to read all of the WCR, just selected portions. They must read the first chapter, which is called Summary and Conclusions and which includes a relatively brief narrative of events from the planning of the trip to the death of Oswald. A more thorough grounding in the text is accomplished by assigning each student a section of one of the next five chapters, on which he or she must deliver a ten minute oral report to the class. Those chapters include a more detailed narrative of events and an account of the Commission's investigation of a possible conspiracy. I simply recommend that students

become familiar with the sections on the background and possible motives of Oswald, and certain of the appendices, which include medical reports, expert testimony, speculations and rumors, and biographies of Oswald and Jack Ruby.

For the most part, the facts discussed in the conspiracy text originated with the WCR, its supporting volumes, or the 1978 House Select Committee in 1978, but the conspiracy writer puts different "spins" on them, in ways ranging from selection to emphasis to assumptions of credibility. Since most conspiracy texts, rather than presenting one coherent theory, indulge in speculation regarding practically every controversial detail of the event, we approach them as encylopedias of conspiracy theories. Consequently, our overall approach to the conspiracy text we discuss in class is to explore it randomly for evidence of the guilt of the various suspects.

In their papers students argue for a specific solution that identifies a suspect (or suspects) and establishes means, opportunity and motive. I do not limit the possible suspects, but I offer students a list from which they may choose. The list includes Oswald, the CIA, the FBI, Castro, Cuban refugees, right wing extremists, organized crime, and any combination of the above. They may adapt an argument they find in their research, but in practice, because of the nature of the texts, they find

this difficult. In most cases, students sort through the required texts and construct their own arguments. Even if they agree with the Warren Commission report, they must choose the most important parts of it and consider the Volumes and the new findings of the 1978 Commission. If they argue for a conspiracy, as most do, they must look for support in various places in those texts, since most are organized by topics that center on discrete parts of the investigation.

In regard to the means and opportunity requirements, the physical and circumstantial evidence, I require students to consult the original source, which in most cases is one of the volumes of a government commission. For example, if they read in Henry Hurt's Reasonable Doubt that one of the employees of Jack Ruby's night club said that he saw Oswald in the club one night talking with Ruby, he must (in this case) consult the original testimony in the WC Volumes, and he should know that he must also find out why the WC chose not to consider the testimony credible.

As they sort through and evaluate different views in their efforts to establish means and opportunity, students practice Carr's type of objective intellectual inquiry primarily by selection, which of course is interpretation. In establishing motive, however, they must interpet by considering the political and cultural context of the event. Both the WCR and Hurt's REASONABLE DOUBT

discuss the political context, and I show a documentary in class about the beginnings of political unrest on college campuses in the early 60's. But if students hope to write convincingly about motive, they must focus specifically on the contemporary cultural roles of the suspects they choose, which means that they must consult other sources in order to acquire the detail and understanding they need to link the cultural role of the suspect with a motive for assassinating the president.

But despite the several class periods we spend discussing the possible political motives of each of the suspects, most students are stubbornly apolitical. In overwhelming numbers, they choose organized crime or the FBI as the guilty party, choices which are political in a fundamental sense, but which are are the least ideological. For obvious reasons, organized crime is an easy scapegoat, and the recent demonization of J. Edgar Hoover, for reasons having more to do with his private life and alleged lust for power than his right wing politics, renders him an easy target as well. Why do students ignore ideology in favor of more personal motives such as greed and power? The most obvious explanation is their political naivete, but I think that suggests a more interesting observation about the naivete of the expectations implicit in the goal of preparing them for "participating in public intellectual life." Ideally, students would not only understand the power of discourse,

but they would be eager to use it to change the world. In the real classroom, however, when given the choice, students use that power to affirm their assumptions about the way things are, not to challenge them. Still, on the basis of their remarks to me as we work on their research papers, I believe I achieve the goal in a more modest sense. A large number of students tell me that they are amazed, if not overwhelmed, by the amount of material available on the subject and resigned to the very likely possibility that, despite the volumes of information, the truth, in the absolute sense, will never be known. Those insights, I feel, suggest a humility towards social problem solving that I consider a significant step in their preparation for "public intellectual life."

During the final week or two of the semester, as students work on their drafts of the research paper, we discuss LIBRA, Don DeLillo's novel. All of the questions on the final exam pertain to the novel, but the most important one, in terms of the themes of the course, centers around DeLillo's Author's Note at the end of the book, in which he says he has made "no attemt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination." Instead, he has "altered and embellished reality" in order to "fill in some of the blank spaces of the known record." I point out to students the similarity between this and Didion's reason for telling "lies" and ask them to tell their own "lies" about Oswald's

character. How would they "fill in the blanks" in an imaginative biography of the accused assassin? By answering this question, students engage in an activity that is parallel not only to DeLillo's writing of the novel but to that of the rogue CIA agent in the novel, a character who fits Didion's description of herself as a "lonely rearranger of things." The CIA agent invents Oswald only to find out that Oswald already exists. At that point, the distinction between facts and lies disappears, so that discovering what really happened, as my students tell me, is impossible. What they have yet to say, however, but what I hope some at least will come to understand, and what I take to be DeLillo's point, is that whether Oswald acted alone, as part of a conspiracy, or at all, is secondary, at best, to the idea that our imaginations, as much or more than the intellectual interpretation of the facts, helped him accomplish his mission and become a part of history.